

2014

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A Review of Life Stories for Themes of Agency and Communion Within an Undergraduate Population

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Introduction

- Career decision-making is a difficult challenge in an undergraduate student’s life. It involves identifying one’s preferences and goals for one’s future.
- It is an important precursor to career-preparation and transition from student to employee.
- Barriers exist within this process that make it problematic. Specifically, many students lack the essential elements necessary to make career decisions.
- Identity formation is one such element that can have an important impact on career decision-making. This process involves reviewing and understanding one’s past in order to make decisions about the future.
- Most undergraduate students have not yet resolved or committed to an identity.
- The McAdams Life Story exercise (1988) is a writing project that prompts students to write about key experiences that shape their identity. A recent study indicated that students who completed the Life Story exercise demonstrated increased in career-decision making and identity formation.
- This study seeks to better understand and identify important story themes that are associated with changes in identity formation and career-decision making and exploration. Building on previous research regarding Life Story themes by McAdams (1988), stories were analyzed for themes of agency and communion.

Research Question(s)

- What sections of the life story are most related to changes in identity formation and career-decision making and/or exploration in an emerging adult population?
- What Life Story themes are important to increased identity formation and career decision-making and/or exploration in an emerging adult population?

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Acknowledgements

- Thank you to the VCU Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approving the study.

Method

Design and Participants

- A within-subjects design was used within this study.
- Undergraduate students (mostly juniors and seniors) enrolled in Psychology 309 (Personality) course were invited to participate in this study. Participants received no compensation but could decline participation at any time during the study.
- Inclusion criteria required continuous enrollment in Psychology 309 and participants had to be at least 18 years of age
- 20 Students completed all tasks of the study (3 male, 17 female)

Materials

- Multiple questionnaires were used to measure identity formation and career decision-making (Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ-IIIx), Career Decision Questionnaire, Career Exploration Survey-Revised (CES-R)).
- The Aspects of Identity Questionnaire is a 35 item Likert scale answered on a five point scale (Cheek, J. M., Tropp, L. R., Chen, L. C., & Underwood, M. K., 1994 (1st edition)).
- The Career Decision Questionnaire is a 18 item Likert scale answered on a four point scale, with one short answer question that will be analyzed in later research (Osipow, S.H., Carney, C.G., Winer, J., Yanico, B., & Koschier, M., 1976 (3rd edition)).

Procedures

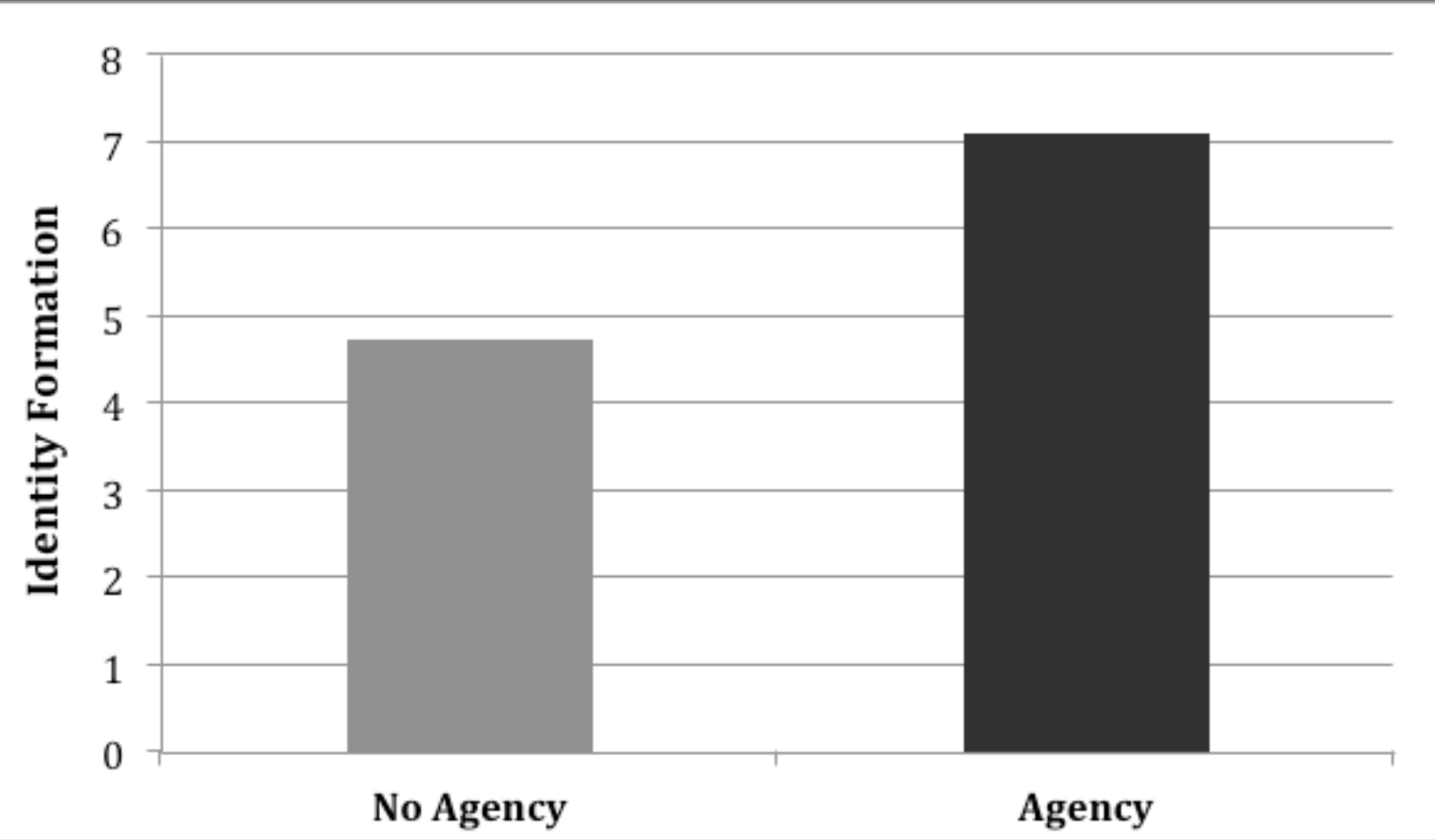
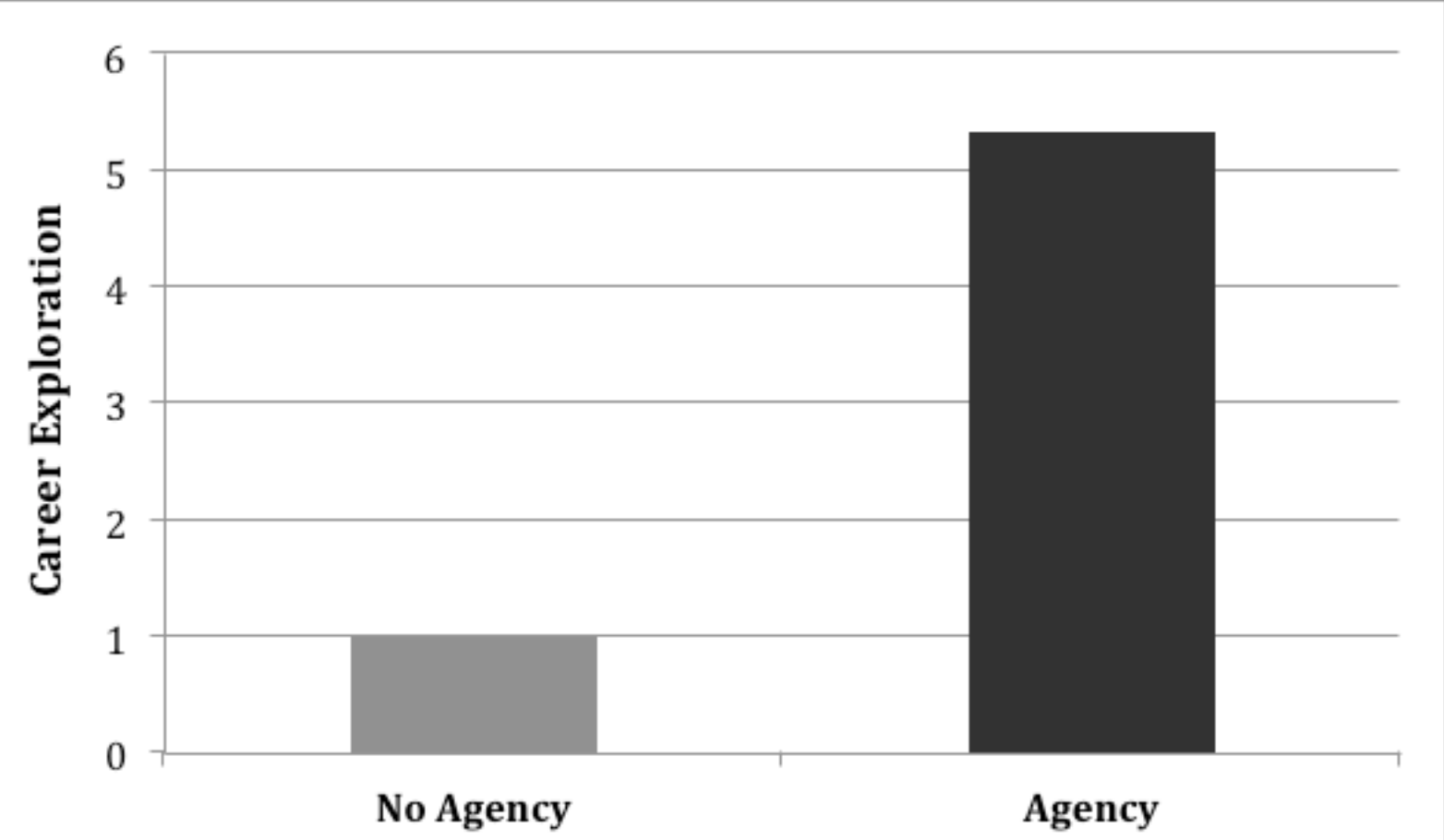
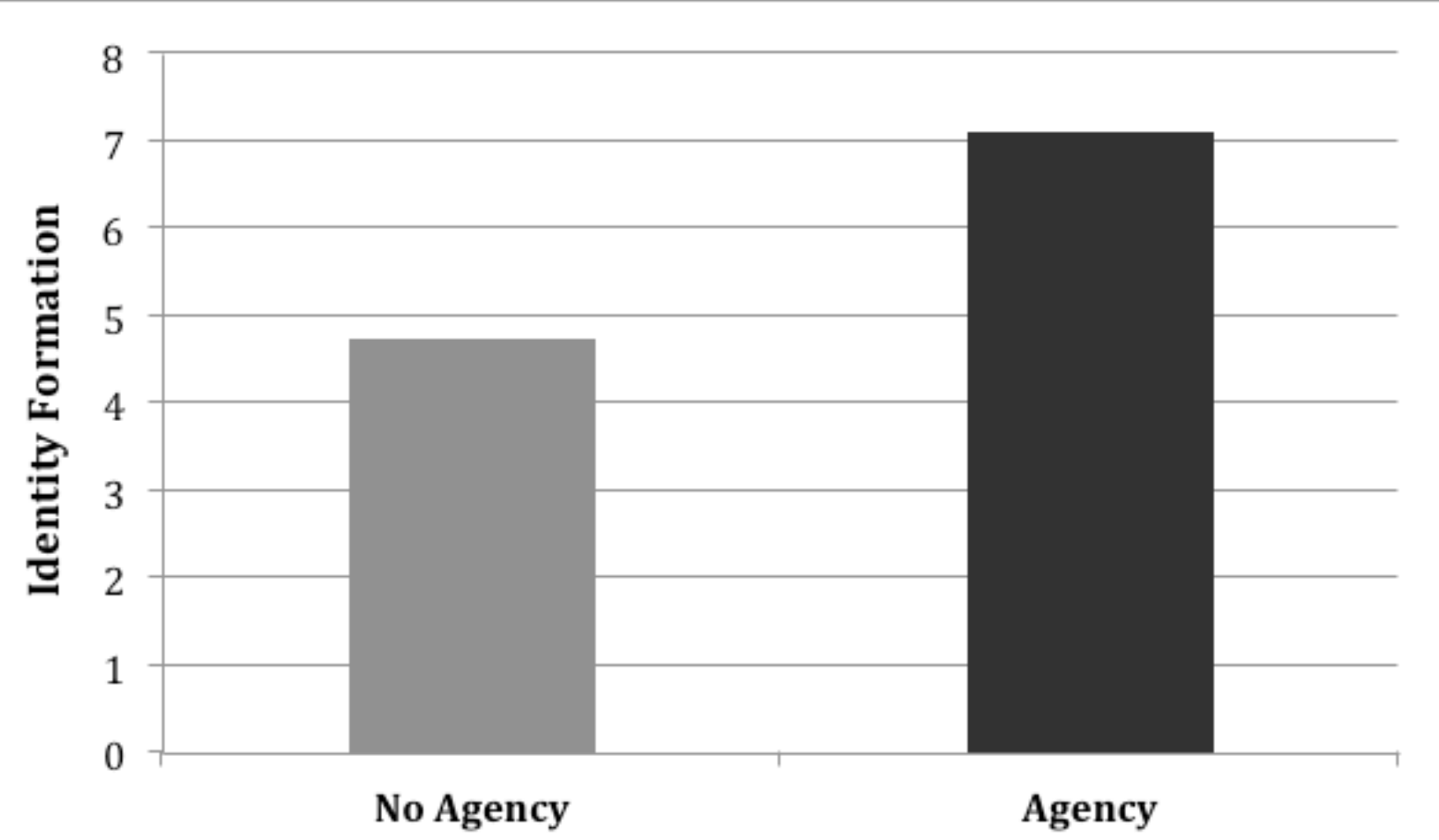
- Students were invited to take part in a research study that examined the impact of a class assignment on identity formation and career decision-making.
- IRB approval was obtained and students were invited, but not required, to take part in the study. The research assistant conducted informed consent and distributed and collected all questionnaires.
- All questionnaires were given at the beginning of the third week of class prior to the assignment of the Life Story Exercise.
- After completion of the Life Story Exercise (submitted near the conclusion of the course), questionnaires were given again to students participating in the study (approximately the 12th week of classes).
- The principal investigator (PI), or professor, stepped out of the room to remain completely anonymous about student participation. All participants were given coded ID’s to keep the professor blind to their participation (to prevent any grading biases in the course itself). The research assistant (RA) remained in the room to collect the measures and answer questions.
- The RA created and organized the data base and entered all the data points for the questionnaires.
- Both the RA and PI analyzed and coded student Life Stories for themes of agency and communion.

Statistical Analyses

- The three dependent variables of interest were: personal identity formation, career decision, and career indecision.
- variables that were coded for the presence or absence of Life Story themes of agency or communion and then used as independent variables in between-subjects t-tests (dependent variables of interest were identity formation, career decision-making and career exploration).
- SPSS version 20.0 was used to perform this analysis.

Results

- Statistically significant differences were found in career decision making (students who wrote about achievement themes in High Point stories endorsed greater career decision-making upon LS completion) and career exploration (students who endorsed status/victory themes in Turning Point sections expressed greater career exploration) but not identity formation, although a trend toward increased identity formation in Turning Point stories emerged.



Discussion/Conclusion

- Data reveals that students who included themes of agency (specifically, themes of achievement) for their “High Point” section of the story demonstrated greater increases in Career Decision-making, $t=6.59$, $p<.05$).
- Data also revealed that students who included themes of agency (specifically, status/victory) for their “Turning Point” section of the story demonstrated greater increases in Career Exploration, $t=4.39$, $p<.05$).
- There was also a trend observed for students who wrote about themes of agency (specifically, self-insight and increased identity) but this relationship did not meet statistical significance, however, likely due to low power in this study.
- As such, it appears the LS exercise may indeed represent a feasible and useful exercise for bolstering student identity formation, which has been identified by past studies as a potential barrier to career decision-making and ultimately, career preparedness.
- No relationships were found among students who endorsed communion themes and changes in any of the dependent variables. As such, themes of agency may be more important to facilitating student career decision-making and exploration than themes of communion.
- Additional research is needed with a larger recruitment plan and students from other university courses to confirm these results and be able to generalize them to the larger undergraduate population. The findings to date are quite promising for assisting undergraduates attempting to transition from student to career and may represent a first step toward resolving their reluctance to begin career preparation upon better understanding of their experiences and interests. More research is needed to continue exploring these relationships and creating a feasible intervention to help undergraduates struggling with this impending change.

Limitations

- Attrition was certainly an issue within this study (50% attrition occurred between pre and post LS study exercise submission. This may be due to the fact that students felt uncomfortable offering their LS papers to the professor to be analyzed for the presence of research variables, or a fear that their grade might be negatively impacted by their stories.
- Numerous students did not answer all items of the questionnaires, thus their data could not be used.
- Power of the population was low and limited to a specific undergraduate class; additional studies that are more inclusive of all undergraduate majors (especially those not to be taught by the PI) would likely yield less attrition and will be considered for future studies.